

PROCTOR, THOMAS

DRAWER 15

PERSONALITIES

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The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

Thomas Proctor

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

***Lincoln Died in
Bed of Man Now
Pauper in N. Y.***



THOMAS PROCTOR.

Thomas Proctor, in whose bed Abraham Lincoln died after he was shot down in Forbes theater by John Wilkes Booth, is now a city charge at the New York city home on Blackwell's Island. Woodcuts of Lincoln's death give Proctor's name as having been at the bedside. Proctor was once a prominent lawyer, but lost his health and his fortune.

THE FRESNO MORNING

REPUBLICAN.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 18, 1921.



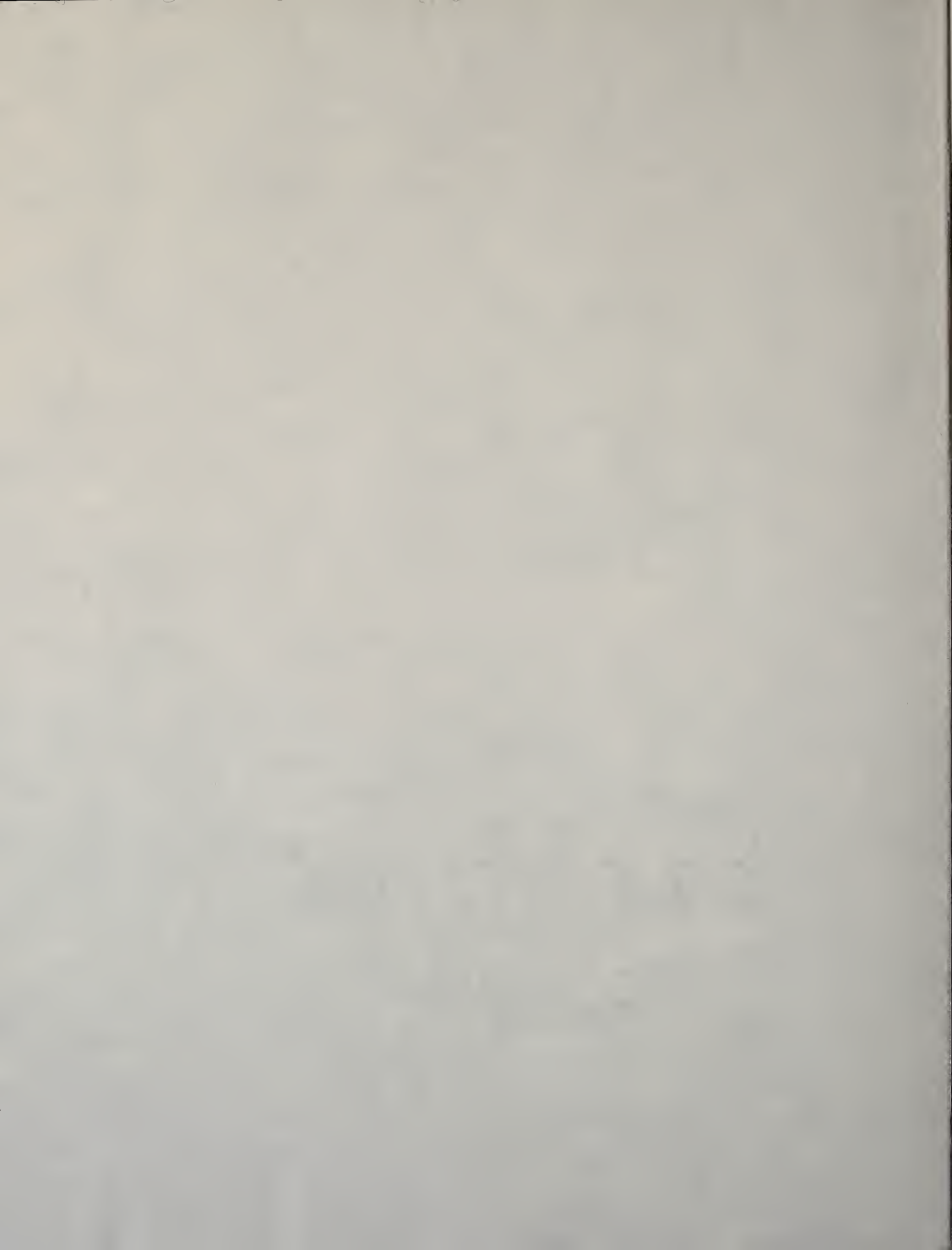
(Photo by International)

THOMAS PROCTOR

Thomas Proctor, in whose bed Abraham Lincoln is said to have died, and who is a pauper in the City home on Blackwell's Island. He was formerly a lawyer of high standing in New York city. A breakdown in his health caused his fortunes to decline.

When Proctor was 17 years old, he was a clerk in the War Department, and lodged in a rooming house opposite Ford's theater in Washington. On reaching his home on the evening Lincoln was shot, he noticed a number of men carrying the form of the unconscious Lincoln. Proctor guided them to his room, where the President later died.

The photo was taken recently and shows Proctor as he appears at the present time.



OUT OF THE RAVEL OF RELICS AND RUMORS, OF REMEMBRANCES AND GUESSWORK, SOMEWHERE WAS THE TRUTH

Far from regarding it as an honor to have Abraham Lincoln die in his boarding house, William Petersen was in a black temper. The Ulke brothers had always known him to be a hard drinker and a wife driver—they were happy for Mrs. Petersen that she was at this moment visiting a daughter at school in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. When her husband now advanced to the bed, seized one the bloodstained pillows from beneath the head of the recently expired President and hurled it angrily through the window into the yard, Henry and Julius were terrified. He soon made loud explanation—his house was a mess—all that blood and mud under foot—unwashed basins and bottles piled up and dozens of old leaking mustard plasters littering the hall. What was worse, he had read in the paper that the President died in a tenement. He would let that paper know and soon that his was one of the most respectable dwelling houses in Washington.

Shortly after nine on Saturday morning the relic hunters descended on the Petersen House. Young Fred Petersen divided up a portion of the President's shirt, tore the bloody sheets into strips, cut into small squares the towels that had been laid over the wet red pillows whenever Mrs. Lincoln had paid her visits—anything with Lincoln's blood on it would be preserved. There were locks snipped from Lincoln's head by the doctors to see the wound better, and the regular inmates of the house divided these in haste, counting them out by the single hair, as the crowds, who were beginning to knock on the front door and beg to come in, must not be allowed to see and covet these most sacred of all reminders that would soon be framed or committed to the leaves of a Bible.

HALF ORNAMENT, HALF ALTAR

This cross bearing Lincoln's name and photograph is surrounded by the skeleton leaves so popular in the 1860's, and the whole arrangement is contained in a glass dome or vitrine. Fragile tributes to the assassinated President like this one appeared suddenly on thousands of parlor tables throughout the country, taking their places alongside the family albums.

The visitors to Willie Clark's room began at several hundred a day. He was a shy young man but he soon found himself roused to lionlike fierceness to defend everything he owned from potential thieves. As they were crafty, he became crafty. He had to watch the crocheted scarf on his bureau and the pincushions, and it was a battle to keep even the most respectable-seeming people from scratching at his wallpaper with their fingernails and whipping out pocket scissors if he looked the other way—his curtains were turning out to be irresistible.

Willie had safely hidden away out of sight Mr. Lincoln's overcoat, suit, and boots and he intended to give back to Robert Lincoln the suit and coat due him. Willie found himself powerfully drawn to those huge boots and, somehow, when all the dividing was done, Willie still had the boots. He thought he had the worsted coverlet too, and the bed, and slept there as he always had the first few nights, but gradually, as the Petersen family learned how insanely anxious people were for anything that had touched Lincoln, spread and bed departed, as had even the forlorn mustard plasters. Willie's secret treasure was the candle stub which doctors had held, lighted, near the President's head to allow each newly arrived consultant to assess the brain damage.

Artists arrived to sketch the room and the deathbed, which turned out to be seventy-four and one half inches long, explaining the poor fit of Lincoln's seventy-six-inch frame—and he was wearing those stout-heeled boots when the first attempt to settle him straight down was made. Sketches were made of William Petersen, who managed not to glower in his portrait, of Henry and Julius Ulke, Thomas Proctor, the boarder upstairs who was passionate about frogs, and Henry Safford, who had waved at the door and invited the bearers in. Willie Clark refused to be sketched, refused to lend a photograph of himself from which a sketch could be made, shrank back into the safety of his own privacy and would not speak a word concerning his three women relatives framed on his bureau—not even to tell that they were Ida, Clara, and Nannie. But he



The Rail Splitter



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A TRUNK FULL OF TREASURES:

The Discovery of Lincoln Family Secrets and Gossip

Peter J. Klarnet

Last fall, the Library of Congress accessioned the papers of Frederick N. Towers, attorney to Robert Todd Lincoln. Practicing in Washington, D.C., Towers began to work for Lincoln following the latter's retirement from the Pullman Palace Car Company. Following Robert's death in 1926, he saw after the interests of his widow, Mary Harlan Lincoln. Historian Jason Emerson discovered these papers, retained files



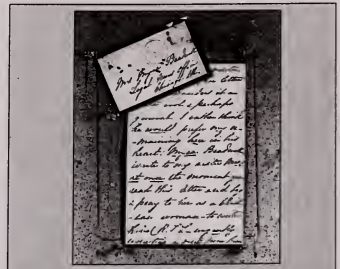
related to Towers's work for the Lincoln family, in 2005. Housed in a steamer trunk, Emerson's search for the long-thought-lost Mary Lincoln "insanity letters"

brought him to Towers's children and the discovery of this unexplored archive. (See Jason Emerson's *Insane Correspondence*, page 6.) In addition to finding copy-photographs of these important Mary Lincoln letters, together with legal papers related to suppressing their use by an early biographer, the trunk was stuffed with files concerning a wide variety of matters on three generations of the Lincoln family.

As much of this collection is the subject of Emerson's forthcoming book on the Mary Lincoln insanity letters, as well as his biography on Robert Todd Lincoln, we will not recount details of Mary's mental health and efforts by her son to destroy letters from this terribly mortifying episode. The purpose of this article is to examine some of the more interesting stories to emerge from collateral material found in the trunk. Among the tax returns, retained correspondence, copies of family deeds is wonderful anecdotal insight... all waiting to be mined from these files. There are some significant records found including a folder on William Herndon and another document-

ing Robert Lincoln's deposit and eventual gift of his father's papers to the Library of Congress. There is a file concerning the identity of the pallbearers at Abraham Lincoln's funeral, and a collection of letters regarding a painting of the President. There is even an extensive record of a family scandal.

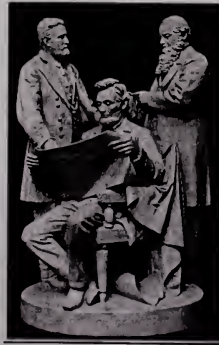
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It was attorney Frederick Towers who had the presence of mind to copy the Mary Lincoln "insanity letters" before Mary Harlan Lincoln had them destroyed. He pinned the originals to a cork board to then photograph.

COLLECTING JOHN ROGERS SCULPTURE: THE COUNCIL OF WAR

Lonnie W. Neubauer




If leading politicians embody the historical eras in which they lived, artists and sculptures can often reveal a great deal about public tastes in those times. From the 1850s through 1880s, John Rogers successfully produced more than 200 pieces of sculpture, both small and monumental, including some 77 of what are known as "Rogers Groups." These depict interesting slices of mid-to-late nineteenth century Americana. Subjects deal with events from American history, including various Civil War tableaux; fables and legends; political leaders; and even ordinary family scenes. Rogers Groups were affordable and treasured items in many American homes. Middle-class Americans displayed them as evidence of their refine-

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could cite James Julia who withdrew several Civil War-era banners from a sale last year despite being advised they very well "might" be right. If he couldn't be certain, he didn't want to facilitate a sale. Wes Cowan was informed that a Lincoln flag in a recent catalog wasn't a "period" textile. He immediately withdrew it from the sale. While you will never find an auctioneer who can accurately present everything that goes through his hands, some make a concerted effort. But, the responsibility rests with you – immediately verify the accuracy of an item when you receive it. No one can be expected to make restitution after the passage of a reasonable amount of time. So, do not delay vetting an item once purchased. Needless to say, previewing material in an auction when possible is essential. "Experience" teaches us to verify everything ourselves and not to simply accept how it is represented. And, experience should teach us with whom to do business and when to shy away.



What's In The Trunk, cont.

I had the opportunity to examine these papers as part of an appraisal of the collection for the purpose of donation to the Library of Congress. In due course, I found a cornucopia of information detailing the later years of Robert T. and Mary Harlan Lincoln. These legal files, most simply folded in marked envelopes, include financial documents, correspondence, and documents that help illustrate a period of generational shift both in terms of the Lincoln family and the legacy of Abraham Lincoln in the American psyche. Primarily, the papers cover the period of 1910-35 – the final days for those still living who had any direct, first-hand contact with the President. This is significant in that Robert Lincoln was active in preserving the dignity of his father's legacy and memory. To that end he only allowed access to his father's personal papers to a select few. And, on occasion, he destroyed manuscript material deemed too private for public consumption. Once he was gone, his control over the record would pass as well. Indeed, when he donated these papers to the Library of Congress, he stipulated that they could not be made available to the public until 21 years past his death.

This collateral material, retained by the family attorney, tells the story of a famous family attempting to preserve some vestige of privacy... a difficult task indeed. Reading through the papers we encounter intrusions by charlatans and hucksters, invasive questions concerning Robert Lincoln's father – the President's life and his demise – all opening a window into the not-so-pleasant realities of fame and celebrity.

The papers also tell the stories of objects and the early history of collecting Lincolniana. Stanton's words, "he belongs to the ages" were more than prophetic in light of the vast number of relics and souvenirs that the family was asked to comment on. Anything Lincoln touched became holy artifact to be cherished, treasured, preserved, and yes... bought and sold. People were already collecting Lincoln during his tenure as president. His death turned that collecting into a feeding frenzy.

One of the envelopes in the trunk, marked "President Lincoln's Clothes," contained a series of letters and news clippings that vividly illustrate the rage for Lincoln. On February 19, 1924 a Philadelphia auctioneer sold for \$6,500 "Clothing worn by Abraham Lincoln when he was assassinated in Ford's Theater, Washington." Described by the *New York Herald* to consist of "a black suit, the collar stained with blood; wrinkled trousers, torn overcoat and faded silk stock," it had purportedly been given by Mary Lincoln to Alphonso Donn, a White House doorkeeper who had pleaded for them as a memento of his former employer and companion. Then someone smelled a rat. The *Washington Evening Star* ran a story on February 20th implying it was fake ("Somebody Cheated Unless Lincoln Wore Couple of Coats When Shot") citing a coat on exhibit at the Chicago His-

torical Society with a similar provenance... coming from Charles Forbes, Lincoln's footman who in turn gave it to White House doorman, Thomas Pendel.

The Lincoln biographer and collector, Isaac Markens became drawn into the dispute after he was asked for his opinion, deciding to contact Robert Todd Lincoln. Markens asked if he could "throw any light on the matter I will thank you & will be thus enabled to determine the question about which I have about concluded that neither of these two is the genuine suit." Lincoln quickly responded in a cordial, yet terse note. After acknowledging receipt of Markens' letter, he only added "As I do not care to attempt to decide this controversy, and have no authentic data bearing upon it, I beg that you will excuse me from making any comment whatsoever about the matter." Interestingly enough, no one at the time realized that both pieces were correct. Reinforcing Robert Lincoln's distaste for journalists, the author of the *Evening Star* didn't bother to read that the clothing sold in Philadelphia was Lincoln's suit. The Chicago Historical Society was in possession of the overcoat.

This was not the first time that the only surviving son of Abraham Lincoln had been asked to declare authentic the Lincoln "death suit." In 1921 Charles Wolcott also contacted Robert concerning a suit of clothes offered by Mr. Alphonse Donn, the same suit offered in Philadelphia three years later. Wolcott asked for Lincoln's opinion regarding authenticity. Again he replied that he could not comment as to genuineness as he "personally never saw them." Lincoln expressed his wish "that they should be put out of the way of hereafter becoming articles for sale, but I should greatly prefer that they should be kept in great seclusion among the possessions of the Museum..." Obviously, the library and the owners of the suit did not come to terms and the suit sold to a "Mr. Douglas" according to another clipping in the file. However, "Mr. Douglas" proved to be a "house bidder" as it never really sold. Donn's granddaughter, Katherine A. Donn, retained the suit and presented it to her daughter who attempted to sell it over the years. Her \$50,000 price tag apparently was too much. Finally, she relented to a \$25,000 offer in 1968 and the suit went to Ford's Theater where it remains on display.

Files related to the assassination were not limited to objects but people as well. In October 1921 a story began circulating in the national papers concerning one Thomas Proctor, who had recently taken refuge as a pauper at Blackwell's Island in New York. Proctor claimed to be the renter of the room at the Peterson House where Lincoln died. The man had been discovered by none other than Dr. Charles A. Leale, who was the first physician to attend to the gravely wounded Abraham Lincoln on the night of April 14, 1865. The two began to talk, reminiscing about the events of that fateful evening, remembering that it was in Proctor's room and bed where Lincoln spent his final hours.

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As soon as the articles appeared, Robert Lincoln was inundated with letters asking him to verify the authenticity of the story and appealing for him to help this poor old man. Brooklyn attorney Timothy Daly implored Lincoln to assist in some manner a man who was one of "the last links of the chain of memory that unites the present with the past..." Others wrote, however, disputing Proctor's claim. Markens wrote to Lincoln on the matter taking a swipe at *The New York Times*: "I doubt not that you like myself are wondering what may be the object of the paper that 'prints all the news that's fit to print' in bringing out at this time these marvelous stories of Thomas Proctor's experience in 1865. I have written to the editor with a view of having the writer call to see me on the subject..."

Thus a dispute arose over one of the most minutely dissected and well-documented events in American history. For his part, Dr. Leale thought Proctor's case quite convincing. According to the *Times*, Leale, at age 80, was still a practicing physician when he encountered Proctor at Blackwell's Island. The doctor reported that Proctor, though sound in body, was a bit weak in mind with a very hazy memory. Leale spoke with Proctor for some time, and during the course of their conversations, Proctor's memories began to return. He revealed that it was his room and bed in which Lincoln had died. The veracity of his claim seemed reinforced by the fact that Thomas Proctor appeared in an early drawing by Albert Berghaus that appeared in *Leslie's* of the scene at the Peterson House.

But Markens and others were not convinced. First off, Proctor claimed to be in the third story bedroom which is problematic as Lincoln was carried to the first floor over the basement of the boarding house. An article appeared in the *New York Herald* on October 23, 1921 contesting Proctor's account, reproducing an April 19, 1865 letter from a William Clark. The eye-witness account, first published in Osborne Oldroyd's 1901 work on the assassination, established with certainty that Lincoln died on the first floor. Citing Proctor's likeness in the *Leslie's* illustration however, they concluded that Proctor was in the room with Lincoln as he lay dying, it just wasn't in his room! The file does not include any record of an effort on Robert Todd Lincoln's part to aid the man, but it appears the news stories generated some interest in the case. The Episcopal City Mission made arrangements for Proctor to live at the St. Andrew's Brotherhood in Gibsonia, Pennsylvania. There, his hazy memory miraculously cleared and he signed a statement making a whole new range of claims that had not been reported in the press. Proctor now claimed that as "a young man in my early twenties, I met and became the confidential friend of Abraham Lincoln. That I was given my position in the War Department and the Bureau of Returns by order of President Lincoln. That I read and studied law under his personal direction." He went on further to claim that Lincoln would often come to visit him at his boarding house "because he could enjoy a peculiar privacy when burdened with the cares of state, and he frequently shared my room in which there were two beds. That state secrets were imparted and talked over with me here." Not only was Lincoln in his room, but he held him in his arms as he died and his head was apparently resting on his right arm when he died! "I have often felt that I inhaled Lincoln's last breath." Frederick Towers and his partner Norman Frost investigated these claims. Their January, 1922 search in the records at the War Department found only that

Proctor had made an application for a position in the Ordinance Office in 1863. Nothing else was known except that he lived in Washington at the time and that he had been born in Dublin, Ireland. Frost also went over to the Peterson House to speak with Osborne Oldroyd, then the live-in custodian of the house. Oldroyd reported that Proctor had visited the house twice and had sworn out a statement that he was a border on the third story the night of April 14, 1865. Why Proctor had gone to such lengths to embellish his story is unknown. But the old man surely enjoyed some attention following decades of obscurity and poverty and likely felt compelled to make his story more interesting.

The Proctor case demonstrates the strength of the Lincoln mystique and efforts his admirers took to associate more closely with his legacy. Most were acting with sincere veneration for the martyred president. But others had more base motivation that threatened to cheapen that legacy. A minor crisis that erupted in 1918 with the death of Mrs. Albert S. Edwards, daughter-in-law of Ninian Wirt Edwards and custodian of the Lincoln Home, brings into focus the problems that such people posed for Robert Lincoln.

When the Lincoln family left Springfield in 1861, their house at 430 South Eighth Street became a rental property and continued in that capacity until 1893 when Robert Lincoln presented the house as a gift to the State of Illinois. That gift was engineered by none other than Osborne Oldroyd, the last tenant of the house. After taking up residence there in 1883, the Civil War veteran and Lincoln admirer and collector, transformed the home into a museum of Lincolniana, charging admission at the door. (He would later repeatedly deny this). He soon stooped to cutting pieces of wood from the house and selling them as souvenirs. Despite this, he fell behind on his rent and began lobbying the state to ask the Lincoln family to donate the house to the public. When the state finally asked Robert Lincoln, there was no way he could refuse; the house became property of the state with Oldroyd serving as custodian at \$1,000 per year. Lincoln did not pursue the two years back-rent owed by Oldroyd, abhorring the publicity. Privately he remarked: "I suppose that in fact my present tenant is a dead-beat and that this whole proceeding is expected practically to provide him a home free of rent."

Oldroyd, a staunch Republican, was finally evicted in 1893 by an incoming state Democratic administration. He and his collection moved on to Washington and the Peterson House. Despite Robert's pleas to install Albert S. Edwards, a Democrat and relative, Governor Altgeld chose one Herman Hoferkamp. (His brief tenure was marked by random acts of insensitivity including the hanging of a photograph of John Wilkes Booth on the mantle!) In 1896, the Republicans regained the Illinois statehouse, and Robert once again had influence over affairs at his old home. From that time on, members of the Edwards family would act as custodians of the house well into the twentieth century. There was only one point where this arrangement came into doubt and is the subject of the contents of an envelope marked in Robert Lincoln's hand: "Lincoln Home October 1918." In 1917, in the interest of ethical government and administration, the state enacted a civil service act to regulate state jobs. The position of Custodian of the Lincoln Home became an official civil service position open to *any qualified applicant*. Meanwhile, Albert Edwards had died in 1915. His elderly widow Josephine continued in the position with assistance from her daughter,



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